

Testimony before the Education Committee
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February 23, 2011

Good morning, Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Sherese Ward, and I serve as the Government Relations & Policy Director for the Connecticut Black Alliance for Educational Options (CT BAEO). The mission of my organization is to increase and expand access to high-quality public school choice options for Black children in Connecticut. Our work is executed by supporting and advocating for innovative and effective policies and programs that empower low-income and working-class Black families. Our national umbrella organization, the Black Alliance for Educational Options is a leader in supporting parents of color that engage in effective advocacy for quality education.

I come before you today to testify on the Governor's House Bill No. 6385.

I am encouraged that our new administration has prioritized this issue, but I am here today to underscore the importance of remaining steadfast in our collective commitment to reform our school's funding system in a manner that will allow high-performing schools to grow and thrive; and in which full support and resources are directed to the individual student as a method of propelling our state's overall academic student achievement. Connecticut BAEO has pledged to be unrelenting in our support towards this effort.

Last year an ad hoc committee was established to conduct what appears will be a similar exercise to what this new task force is designed to do. Upon conclusion, the committee agreed to a clear set of design principles, but the State Board of Education did not move forward with an action plan.

Additionally, the Connecticut Commission on Educational Achievement's report, "*A plan to help close the achievement gap*" recommends that we invest intelligently, by "providing an effective and transparent way of funding public education." Again, highlighting the pressing need to reform the way in which Connecticut schools and children are funded.

I am hopeful that this new initiative will ultimately result in meaningful and passable legislation. However, I would be remiss not to express my immediate concern about its current proposed composition. I urge this committee and our leadership to bring together a cohort that is fully diverse and representative of the variety of public school types (traditional and non-traditional) to this table. If we are honest about engaging in this discussion fairly, this prioritization must be made. If not, I fear that we may again be faced with a stalemate, or worse, a proposal that fosters continued inequity for our minority students.

Ahead of the task force's commencement, I feel it is critical that specific parameters (i.e. ensure consistent and equitable distribution of funds, facilitate public school choice, set a clear foundation amount, encourage transparency, efficiency) are put in place that will drive its work, all the while maintaining a laser focus on student achievement. Our children truly deserve it!

In closing, while I am optimistic, I find it extremely disappointing that our neediest children will have to again wait for an opportunity to have the full supports they so desperately need, as our state for yet another time, investigates, assesses and debates the worthiness of an enhancement that experts, locally and nationally have proven is a best practice in the work of reforming public education.

Thank you for your time and for this opportunity to speak before this committee.